

Michigan governor belatedly orders change in Flint's water supply

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Michigan Governor Rick Snyder announced October 8 that the city of Flint will reconnect to the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) to supply water to its residents. The state of Michigan will cover the bulk of the estimated \$12 million cost of the shift.

Snyder made the decision after independent studies proved that lead in the water has been poisoning Flint citizens, particularly young children, who are especially vulnerable to the toxic heavy metal, since the city, then under control of a state-appointed emergency manager, disconnected from DWSD and began drawing water from the Flint River 17 months ago.

Since April 30, 2014, when Flint Emergency Manager Darnell Earley implemented the switch, angry residents have complained about the water coming into their homes and were stonewalled by city and state officials. Complaints about the foul odor, taste and color of the water were answered by claims that the water complied with federal safety regulations according to official testing. Even after several boil water advisories were issued by authorities in the first months after the switch, officials cited their testing of the water as proof that the water was fundamentally safe to drink.

As of June 2014, the average Flint residential water bill was \$140 a month—the highest rates for water in Genesee County. Flint resident Maxine Powell expressed the general public outrage when she told the press, “You’re asking Flint citizens to pay for something we aren’t even getting. You may as well tell us to drink out of a toilet.”

In January 2015, after elevated levels of trihalomethane (TTHM) were detected in the water, notices were sent to water customers by the city warning that drinking water with excessive amounts of TTHM over “many years” could result in liver, kidney

or central nervous system problems as well as an increased risk of cancer.

Even then, demands that the city reconnect with the DWSD were answered with the argument that the switch was “irreversible” due to financial imperatives.

In October of last year, General Motors made its own deal to switch back to DWSD water at its Flint engine plant when it discovered the water supplied from the city of Flint was rusting engine parts due to the high chloride levels.

Snyder’s announcement this week represents a humiliating reversal. As Dr. Marc Edwards, who heads the team from Virginia Tech university that conducted extensive testing of the water of Flint residents, has documented, the state, local and federal agencies “have proved themselves unworthy of the public trust. Flint residents have been left to fend for themselves, when it comes to dealing with the dangers of high lead in their water.”

Even the pro-business *Detroit Free Press* called it “An obscene failure of government.”

But the newspaper has been a vehement supporter of the emergency managers appointed by Snyder and his Democratic predecessor Jennifer Granholm, in Flint, Detroit and a half-dozen other cities and school districts. The Flint emergency manager responsible for the lead poisoning crisis, Darnell Earley, is now emergency manager of the Detroit Public Schools.

After the Virginia Tech team released its findings, a firestorm of press coverage resulted. Shortly after, a local hospital released its own findings showing that Flint children examined over the last two years had drastically increased blood lead levels since the switch in water source.

News reports followed in media outlets across the country, including the *New York Times*, Al Jazeera

America, CNN, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and *US News and World Report*.

Erin Brockovich, the environmental activist celebrated in the Hollywood movie, posted on her Facebook page, condemning the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality Communications Director Brad Wurfel for his “disgusting and shameful” role in discrediting the Virginia Tech study on Flint lead in water.

Yet, even as the governor made his announcement, Snyder defended the actions of authorities in poisoning tens of thousands in Flint. He shamefacedly claimed adherence to federal standards, blaming the regulations for not making lead testing in the schools mandatory. A belated testing of Flint schools for lead in the water showed dangerously high levels of lead were being ingested by thousands of local schoolchildren.

The reconnect to the DWSD is reported to have a price tag of \$12 million, plus another \$4 million for addressing the lead issue within Flint. Snyder said that he would ask the state legislature for \$9.3 million, including \$6 million for the switch and \$3.3 million for lead filters and testing staff to monitor. Flint would provide \$2 million and a private donor has committed to \$4 million.

The changeover is reported to take two weeks—not to make the switch in the infrastructure, but to put the finances together. Then, according to the findings of Dr. Edwards, significantly reducing the lead coming into the homes of residents will take another six months, due to the damage already done to the pipes by the corrosive water.

The city then plans to switch water sources again, ostensibly next year, when the construction of the new Karegnondi Pipeline to Lake Huron is scheduled for completion.



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